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ABSTRACT

The principal goals of the State University of New York (SUNY) Brockport's large-scale writing assessment are to determine if a writing program actually helps students to write better and, if so, whether that growth can be measured during the college years. Portfolio assessment has become an attractive alternative to single-test essay at SUNY Brockport. If such an assessment technique seems premature at the placement level, once students are on campus portfolios make sense as an outcomes measure. A commonplace phenomenon confounds the writing program at Brockport: well over 1,000 transfer students (with markedly uneven writing skills) enter every year. A second tier of required writing was established at the "rising-junior" (second semester sophomore and incoming transfer students). In the absence of resources to support multiple measures of writing, alternating the single-test essay and portfolio offers the best of both worlds. (RS)

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Portfolio and Test Essay: The Best of Both Writing Assessment Worlds at SUNY Brockport

by Alice G. Brand

Now that the need for large-scale writing assessment is received wisdom across the nation (Ewell, 1985), the State University of New York system has mandated outcomes assessment across all disciplines. And SUNY Brockport is particularly serious about its writing assessment.

SUNY Brockport is a comprehensive college situated on the outskirts of suburban Rochester in western New York. With 9,000 full and part-time students, Brockport sustains 36 undergraduate departments and nearly the same number of graduate programs, both heavily oriented toward the professions and the social sciences.

Goals

Given the state mandate, the principal goals of Brockport's writing assessment are to answer two questions: Does a writing program actually help students write better? If so, can that growth be measured during the college years? These questions pose a host of others and elicit a variety of answers (Brand, 1992; Ruth and Murphy, 1988). But what I want to illustrate is how Brockport is answering that mandate.

Due to cutbacks a decade ago, the current length of Brockport's college composition requirement is one semester, although about 25% of our incoming freshmen first receives one to two additional semesters of remedial instruction. On the basis of SAT, TSWE, Regents scores, and high school records students are initially placed in ENL 101 (English for Foreign Students), ENL 102 (Fundamentals of College Composition), ENL 112 (College Composition—the required course), or become eligible for waiver from the lower division requirement. Potential waiver students complete a 2 hour essay exam that is scored by committee on the basis of the three placement levels noted above. A single-essay test is then administered during the first composition class session to confirm this placement.

However, over the last few years there has been a growing dissatisfaction in the profession with the single-test essay. Because it fails to account for the revision component of the writing process, portfolio assessment has become an attractive alternative. Briefly, in portfolios, essays written over a given period are collected and then evaluated. The great advantage of the portfolio approach is that it emphasizes writing that occurs over time–the process–not simply the product. It can track the evolution of one piece of writing over the course of its development or, more likely, a variety of rhetorical tasks collected at intervals. It can also become an option available to those students for whom time constraints or personal variables have prevented them from demonstrating writing proficiency in a single-test essay (Holt and Baker, 1990). And over the long haul it makes more sense for students to compete with themselves using portfolios—aiming, so to speak, for their personal best—than for them to compete with their peers on single-test essays.

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Portfolios thus seem to be the penultimate assessment tool because they legitimate the writing process and can represent a more complete picture of writing performance. In fact, portfolios have apparently been successful in placing incoming Miami University of Ohio students. In an innovative move the school invites students to submit writing portfolios through which credit and advanced placement may be awarded.

At Brockport such a plan at the placement level has seemed premature for a number of reasons. First, if students are to compete for seats in our composition courses, we believe that writing samples should be completed under similar conditions: time, instructional technique, amount and kinds of collateral reading, topics, and class climate—to name a few (Witte and Faigley, 1983). It would be a complicated if not impossible task to obtain equivalent portfolios from incoming freshmen or transfers, for that matter, much less require common topics and conditions for writing them. Second is the nagging problem of monitoring and certifying authenticity of portfolios. This can be a fatiguing and costly process, especially when portfolios arrive from off campus. Then there is the turn-around-time expected by the academic advisors and the registrar's office. Both put a premium on the speed of such evaluations. Placement via portfolio requires more faculty-reader time. When administered during class time and scored by individual instructors, the single-test essay is fast and not costly. And it will sort students.

But once students are on campus, portfolios make utter sense as an outcomes measure, regardless of what skills students bring to their colleges. In the freshman composition courses at Brockport four pieces of writing representing a range of purposes and patterns of rhetorical development are collected over the course of the semester. Both at mid-term and at the end of class, portfolios are exchanged, and graded by another member of the writing faculty who holistically confirms or questions their quality. Within the classroom setting the difficulty of authenticating the accumulated material is largely overcome by integrating zero-level and intermediary drafts into the portfolio for instructor review.

The Rising-Junior Phenomenon

But another–and no doubt commonplace–phenomenon confounds the writing program at Brockport. Our student population as a whole is fairly unstable. Over four years only 40 to 45% of our original freshmen remain to graduate, and we bring in well over 1000 transfers every year–who tend to arrive with markedly uneven writing skills. It is as if a new wave of freshman writers arrives every fall but they are called juniors. In sum, we do not keep our incoming freshmen in composition courses long enough. Nor do we provide them or our transfers, for that matter, with any other form of direct writing instruction to make meaningful either a portfolio or single-essay assessment.

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Because of these major shifts in population, a faculty senate resolution passed a year ago approved a second tier of required writing. The reasoning was this: If budgetary constraints prohibit us from providing direct instruction in writing at every undergraduate level (the ideal situation), we think a second semester of writing will do the most good after the influx of new juniors takes place.

After a decade of one semester of freshman composition, the J-level (standing for Junior) or advanced writing course in the major has now become the second semester of direct instruction in composition. The major differences, of course, are that the J-writing course is delayed until the upper level when students are presumably more mature and it is taught within the major.

Almost immediately faculty campus-wide grew concerned that these upper division writing courses might become remedial rather than genuinely introduce students to the advanced writing within their chosen fields. Thus, to insure the writing competency of newly declared majors and transfers, a second layer of assessment has been legislated. Assessment at the rising-junior level acts as a check against decay in writing skills after formal instruction at the lower division.

A brief definition: Junior status is awarded students who have completed 54 credits. The term, rising-junior, refers to second semester sophomores who have completed between 45 and 54 credits as well as to transfer students awarded the same number of credits and preparing to declare their majors. So that transfers and Brockport natives need to pass the competency in order to register for a J-level course in their major.

According to the faculty senate resolution, Brockport sophomores take the rising-junior writing competency test during the second semester of their sophomore year. Transfer students take it during one of four summer orientation sessions before they begin at Brockport. Based on the assumption that students are just entering their majors but not already in them, the content of the single-test essay itself is general. However, the essays are scored by representatives of the departments into which the students are entering. Disciplinary faculty thus take responsibility for decisions on the writing competencies of their prospective majors.

Furthermore, this is where we think portfolios will have their greatest utility. Indeed, it is in the content areas in which the conventions of discourse become specialized. Serious students of almost anything have cause enough to write. For it is in writing that disciplinary thinking materializes and endures.

This is not new to writing programs. Portfolios have already made inroads across the curriculum. To assess student writing in the disciplines (as well as its new general education program), *CUNY Lehman College* uses portfolios that include three pieces of interdisciplinary writing (but none incidentally from freshmen composition). As part of a larger assessment of the General College Program, students at *SUNY Fredonia* assemble portfolios from entry through the senior year. Such a policy is in the discussion stages at Brockport.

Pre-Graduation Check

But there is still one more milestone. The last component of writing assessment materializes almost like the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

A while ago this story circulated on the Brockport campus: An executive of a major Rochester business purportedly read an egregiously poor job application letter from a SUNY Brockport graduate. Word has it that he met with the president of the college and said something to the effect that "it is one thing to accept freshmen who can't write. But it is quite another thing to graduate one." And thrust the letter into the president's hand.

This is why pregraduation checks of writing make sense, and why portfolios have begun to appear locally as pregraduation apparatus. For example, a two-tiered portfolio has been approved by *Cortland's* English Department. Graduating English majors are asked to submit a portfolio with two freshmen pieces and three critical papers: a literary analysis, an historical piece, and one other. The instructor signs and certifies to its authenticity. Portfolios serve in a cross-curricular capacity whereby advisors within the major use them to certify literacy. Supplemented by an exit exam, portfolios must "pass muster" or be revised until they do. Even if poor writing cannot prevent students from graduating, some schools go so far as to stamp students' writing status on their transcripts: competent, marginal, or unsatisfactory–enough to give anyone pause, employer or student.

In the absence of resources to support multiple measures of writing, alternating the single-test essay and portfolio offers the best of both worlds. The single essay provides a quick estimate of skill level for placement. The portfolio within the freshmen course and J-level courses, and as a pre-graduation check provides a broader and deeper look at student progress in relation to his or her professional future. At the freshman level essays are scored by composition instructors. At the upper division, they are scored by departmental or divisional committees. At the lower level weak writers take the basic writing course. At the upper level they receive remediation at our Writing Center.

One last note. Just as the disciplinary faculty grew concerned about the skills of their rising-juniors, it also expressed concern that it was untrained to teach writing formally to their majors. An honest concern. Clearly, without a massive faculty reeducation effort, curriculum would not change, much less assessment; portfolios or single exams would provide little control over ratings and risk wide disparity among them. Consensus is needed as to what characterizes strong and weak academic writing. And that takes faculty development.

Brockport has begun to address this issue as well. The president has underwritten semester-long faculty seminars offered over three years. A first group has successfully undergone training not only to teach writing within their disciplines, but also to learn how to evaluate and respond to it, to learn what constitutes good writing, and to learn what to do about it when it is not. Improving the quality of undergraduate education at Brockport and countering declining academic literacy are simply the long and short of our job.

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